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Front Edit Other
Page Page Page

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ATOM SMUGNESS

Chairman Lewis L. Strauss of the Atomic Energy Commission recently lowered a boom—or bomb—on the pervading American attitude of complacency over our atomic leadership. After a look at Soviet progress, during the atoms-for-peace exposition at Geneva, Mr. Strauss warns that unless the United States expands its training programs for scientists we will be trailing Russia in the atomic race within a few years.

The AEC chairman observed the Communists appear to be training scientists at a faster clip than America. Our universities, he said, are turning out about half the number of engineers the country needs today. He quoted the Central Intelligence Agency as declaring that between 1950 and 1960 Russia will have graduated 1,200,000, while this country will turn out only 900,000.

Russians revealed nothing new at the Geneva atomic show, Mr. Strauss said. They appear stronger in basic research than in application. That could suggest the possibility of a concentrated drive for research developments, which are the basis for practical uses. And the Soviets are dedicated to over-reaching the United States.

So far we are ahead in peaceful applications of atom energy, as we clearly are in the production of atomic and fission weapons. But this is no reason, no excuse for smugness. Reds astonished the world by the quick strides they made in this field, and they are forging on.

The AEC boss is not loosing an empty cry of "Wolf." The depletion of classes in engineering and allied subjects is a fact. A consensus from leading American scientists, founded up early last summer by the New York Times, showed that in the next generation, perhaps only a few years hence, the nation will experience an acute lack of engineers. During the last four or five decades the percentage of high school students studying mathematics and physics has dropped heavily. Science teachers are at a premium, and many science courses are taught by unqualified instructors.

Now we are ahead in the atomic field. We started several years before Russia. In another decade or so, the situation can be reversed—unless the nation does something to increase the production of competent new scientists.

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